

Obituary

Dan Henry Nicolson (1933–2016)



On 2nd June 2016, the international botanical community lost one of its eminent members, Dr. Dan Nicolson passed away. He was 82 and unwell for the last 6 years due to Alzheimer's.

I was fortunate to have learned the basics of plant nomenclature from Dan. He and the late Dr. C.J. Saldanha were the co-directors of the Hassan Flora Project (late 1968–mid 1974), based at St. Joseph's College, Bangalore. Dan visited the project office during 1969–73 for a period of 2–3 months. I joined the project in August 1970 as a Junior Scientific Assistant, and Mr. T.P. Ramamoorthy was the Senior Scientific Assistant. I met Dan in August 1971. I was captivated by Dan's enthusiasm for both taxonomy and nomenclature. When I struggled with the identification of an *Indigofera* species, Dan sat with me, appreciated my flower dissection, went through the keys in Gamble's *Flora of the Presidency of Madras*, and confirmed the identity of the specimen. During his 1972 and 1973 visits, he

taught us the basics of plant nomenclature. After the Hassan Flora Project, Ramamoorthy went to USA to pursue his Ph.D., whilst I joined The National College, Bangalore and taught botany for eight years (1974–1982). During my teaching career, my contact with Dan was occasional, but it became regular when I moved to the USA in 1982.

Life journey

Dan was born on 5th September 1933 in Kansas City in Missouri, USA. He grew up in Shenandoah, Iowa, where his parents ran the Henry Field's Seed & Nursery Co. In August 1959, Dan married Alice (Ally) Black Crawford, who is also a botanist, and went to the Montreal Botanical Congress for their honeymoon. The next year, they left for two years of field work in Malaysia and Southeast Asia as part of his thesis. With all their traveling, they had three children and each born in a different country: John in Manila (1960), Sally in Beirut (1962), and David in Washington, D.C. (1964). Dan's family of three children has now increased with eight grandchildren.

Education and Career

Dan had a distinguished botanical career that spanned over nearly 60 years. He started his botanical career at a quite young age of 15 when he accompanied his father and a colleague to Europe and they had introduced a hybrid corn during that trip. Dan studied at the Grinnell College, Iowa and received his A.B. degree in 1955 and his senior thesis was titled "The genus *Asclepias* in Iowa". In the same year, he published his thesis work with his Professor, Norman H. Russell, as a coauthor. Subsequently, he graduated with a M.B.A. degree from Stanford University in 1957. At Stanford, in spite of his M.B.A. studies, he spent considerable time as an assistant at the herbarium, which earned him his nickname "Herbie" and this might have led him to realize that plants were really his passion. He went to Cornell University to work with Prof. G.H.M. Lawrence and obtained his M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees in 1959 and 1964, respectively. His main interest was in Araceae on which he

wrote his thesis, titled “A revision of the genus *Aglaonema*”. To study this family, he made a trip to Malaysia in 1960–61 and subsequently visited many European herbaria.

In 1964, Dan was hired by the Smithsonian Institution. In the same year, he went to the American Institute of Biological Science meetings, attended the Edinburgh Botanical Congress, and spent three months collecting in Dominica. In 1966, Dan collected in Nepal for a year as a Senior Fulbright Fellow. In 1979, he was in Sri Lanka for a month collecting Araceae (published in 1987) and in 1983 he made collections in Yunnan for three months.

Dan was elected to the Washington Biologists’ Field Club in 1975, served as a treasurer from 1981 to 1997 and chair of the finance committee from 1997 to 2001. For the International Association of Plant Taxonomy (IAPT), Dan was the Secretary of the General Committee from 1988 to 1999 (and had previously served on the Committee, possibly from 1981). He was a member of the Editorial Committee for all editions of the *Code*, from the Sydney Congress (1981) to the Vienna Congress (2005), for which he was President of the Nomenclature Section. He was a very efficient Nomenclature Editor of *Taxon* for very many years until he stepped down in 1999.

Dan authored or co-authored over 200 publications: *Flora of Hassan District* (1976), coedited by C.J. Saldanha with main contributions by T.P. Ramamoorthy and K.N. Gandhi; *An Interpretation of Van Rheedee’s Hortus Malabaricus* (1988), coauthored by Prof. K.S. Manilal and C.R. Suresh; *Flora of Dominica*, Part 2: Dicotyledoneae (1991), coauthored by his wife; *The Forsters and the botany of the second Cook Expedition (1772–1775)*, edition 1 and 2 (2003, 2004), coauthored by R. Fosberg, for which Dan was awarded the Stafleu Medal by the IAPT Vienna meeting (2005); and *Taxonomic Literature*, Supplements 7 and 8 (2008, 2009), coauthored by Lawrence J. Dorr.

Dan classified the history of botanical nomenclature into three overlapping periods: the schismatic period (1840–1930), the dark ages (1915–1950), and the IAPT renaissance (1950–present) in his article in *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden* 78: 33–56. 1991.

A database was started by Dan in 2000 at the Smithsonian to keep track of the histories related to acceptances and rejections of scientific names of plants since 1892, when the practice began. According to Dan, his works may be divided into

three areas: (1) Monographic work in Araceae (knowing a lot about little), (2) Floristic work (knowing little about a lot), and (3) Nomenclature (knowing a lot about nothing [abstract]).

Upon my arrival at the Harvard University Herbaria in August 1995, Dan sent me a large number of additions and corrections to the then Gray Herbarium Card Index. I regularly consulted him on nomenclatural problems. Dan’s last nomenclatural email to me was in July 2008. Prior to Dan’s retirement, in one of my personal talks with him, I asked about his plan for post retirement life. His response was that Ally and he might spend a few years at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, Paris to work on Araceae and on the Wallich’s Catalogue. But his health issue came in the way and his visit to Paris did not materialize.

Although Dan retired in 2007, he continued to respond to nomenclatural questions for a few more years. He dispersed his extensive botanical library to many fellow botanists when he vacated his Smithsonian office. I received Roxburgh’s 1832 edition of *Flora of Indica* printed in 1874. Post retirement, he and Ally made several trips, to Tibet, Chile and Easter Island, and Lake Van in Turkey. In 2012, they moved from their longtime home in Arlington to Collington, a continuing care retirement community in Prince George’s County, MD. I occasionally talked on the phone with Dan and Ally prior to their move to Collington.

At the end of his visit in 1971, Dan gave me his hand-lens for my use and I kept that as a treasure. In August 1982, while I was leaving for the USA, I passed Dan’s gift to one of my former students with an emphasis that the hand-lens came from a great scholar. When I came to the USA, I landed in Washington, D.C. and Dan received me at the airport; I spent three days with Dan’s family after which I continued my journey to the then Northeast Louisiana University (NLU), Monroe. Dan not only bought my bus ticket but also had paid \$50 on my behalf as a deposit towards my housing in Monroe. I thanked Dan and promised to return the bus fare and housing deposit money after a few months. His response was that I should not worry about returning the money, but pass it on to another needy Indian student.

At NLU, I wrote the treatment on the Asteraceae of Louisiana and in this regard, in August 1983, I went to the Smithsonian Institution and spent two weeks studying their holdings of the Asteraceae specimens from Louisiana. During that time, Dan and Ally



Dan and Alice Nicolson in Mysore Temple (1981)

were generous to host me (they hosted many foreign visitors including Prof. Armen L. Takhtajan). [In my dedication section of the *Asteraceae* of Louisiana (1989), I mentioned Dan's name].

Occasionally, as a pastime, I posed several riddles to Dan's family members; a few they could solve and a few they could not; Dan teased me whether I spent my post Hassan project time in doing any research or learning all about riddles. We discussed Greek and Indian mythologies. Dan compared the physical strength of the Greek mythological hero Hercules with Bheema in Mahabharatha. He also compared Valmiki's epic Ramayana with Homer's Greek story of The Iliad and The Odyssey (both epics have similarities and differences). Dan was surprised to know that I did not know anything about Homer's work [Until then, I knew only about Hercules].

Dan summarized Homer's story; he told me the incidence how Odysseus, who was in disguise, was recognized after 17 years by his maid servant Eurycleia because of a scar on his leg. He was dramatic when he narrated the story. Dan also told me the story of Achilles and explained to me about the phrase "Achilles' heel" (a weakness in spite of overall strength).

As a coincidence, Dan's birth date was 5th September, which is celebrated in India as Teachers' Day, and Dan was respected as an excellent teacher of nomenclature by many Indian botanists, who have interacted with him in person or by mail. He was highly respected for his cheerful outlook, outgoing attitude, dedication to high standards, and integrity with those working in botany. Dan's unique personality was his modesty in all walks of his life; Dan was admired for his excellence in precise writing and his attention to details; his nomenclature reviews provided great learning experience for youngsters. Many Indian botanists wrote to me stating that they keep Dan's mail as a botanical treasure. "Dan's papers on botanical orthography have been highly referenced by nomenclaturists. He made many proposals to the Codes, e.g., Orthography of Names and Epithets: Latinization of personal names (*Taxon* 23: 549–561. 1974; see Rec. 73G in the 1978 Leningrad Code), and Isonyms and pseudo-isonyms: identical combinations with the same type (*Taxon* 24: 461–466. 1974; see Art. 6 Note 1 in the 2000 St. Louis Code).

One Indian botanist wrote to me mentioning his sadness about Dan having to endure Alzheimer's. I shared his sadness and remarked that "Life has not been fair to everyone".

Nevertheless, except for the health setback in his last few years, Dan's life was truly beautiful, and as a coincidence, in 2008, for the New England Botanical Club, Dan was the annual distinguished Speaker, and as the Vice-President of the Club, I introduced him as the "Nomenclature Guru" of Indian botanists. Dan gave a captivating talk entitled "My Beautiful Life".

Dan was commemorated by several authors in naming their novelties: *Alocasia nicolsonii* A. Hay, *Amorphophallus nicolsonianus* Sivad., *Aridarum nicolsonii* Bogner, *Chlorospatha nicolsonii* Croat & L.P. Hannon, *Rhaphidophora nicolsonii* P.C. Boyce, *Schismatoglottis nicolsonii* A. Hay, *Clerodendrum nicolsonii* A. Rajendran & P. Daniel, *Cinnamomum nicolsonianum* Manilal & Shylaja and *Alchemilla nicolsonii* K.M. Purohit & Panigrahi.

Dan respected other cultures and had an open mind on religious beliefs. He was a scholar and a gentleman. We all will miss him.

Ave atque vale!

Kanchi N. Gandhi

(Harvard University Herbaria, USA)